

VZCZCXR08100
OO RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0060/01 1010316
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 100316Z APR 08
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0735
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIS/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0791

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000060

SIPDIS

NOFORN
SIPDIS

NSC FOR PHU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 4/10/2018
TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL KDEM PTER TH
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: NEW NSC CHIEF SEEN AS THREAT TO PEACE

PROCESS

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 47 (SAMAK BLESSES BUT DOES NOT EMBRACE PROCESS

1B. CHIANG MAI 40 (PEACE DIALOGUE AWAITS SIGNAL FROM NEW GOVERNMENT)
1C. BANGKOK 909 AND PREVIOUS (SAMAK MISSPEAKS)

CHIANG MAI 00000060 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (S/NF) Thai Government point-man for secret talks with southern insurgents Mark Tamthai fears the newly announced National Security Council chief prefers harsh tactics over conciliation. Tamthai sees the next few weeks before the new chief takes office as a window for outreach directly to Prime Minister Samak to persuade him to support actively continuation of the nascent peace process. Samak has yet to embrace the process, but did give the green light for the March 27-28 round of RTG-insurgent talks in Jakarta. Tamthai said the Jakarta round focused on how to keep the process moving forward despite lack of clear support from the new government in Bangkok. Insurgent leaders at the talks denied ordering the March 15 bombing of the CS Pattani hotel, attributing it to an election vendetta. RTG officials briefed on disciplinary steps taken against military officials responsible for the March 21 death in custody of a Muslim cleric. The next round of talks is tentatively scheduled for May. End Summary.

New NSC Chief "A Huge Step Backwards"

12. (S/NF) Consul General met April 9 in Chiang Mai with Dr. Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace and point-man for the RTG's secret dialogue with southern insurgents. Tamthai opened the meeting by lamenting the previous day's announcement that National Security Council Secretary General (NSC SYG) Lt.-Gen. Siripong Boonpat would be replaced by Lt.-Gen. Surapol Phuan-aiyaka. Surapol's appointment could be a "huge step backwards" for the nascent peace process, Tamthai said. Surapol had been NSC Deputy SYG up until two years ago (before the September 2006 military coup), and during that time had advocated using RTG hit

squads to take out insurgent leaders. His proposal was never adopted, however.

¶ 13. (S/NF) Tamthai explained that - unlike outgoing NSC SYG Siripong, who was not greatly knowledgeable about the south but was open to all ideas - Surapol had firm views on the south and was unlikely to show much flexibility. Tamthai said he did not know whether Surapol was appointed precisely because of his hard-line views on the south, or for political reasons related to his ties to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (the two were classmates in pre-caDET school, and Siripong served as NSC Deputy SYG during the last Thaksin administration) Tamthai and his pro-dialogue RTG circle tried to weigh in with current Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej prior to the appointment of a new NSC chief, but "I don't think our views reached him."

¶ 14. (S/NF) It is still unclear how Samak views the peace process, Tamthai said. On the one hand, Samak did provide via Deputy PM Sahas Bunditkul a green light for the March 27-28 round of RTG-insurgent talks in Jakarta. On the other hand, Samak has said and done little else, other than his apparent public gaffe that partially blew the cover of the heretofore "secret" dialogue. Because Surapol will not take office for about three weeks until a royal decree is signed, Tamthai sees this as a window to approach Samak directly in hopes of persuading him to embrace personally the peace process. Tamthai told CG he would be in Bangkok April 10 to participate in a strategy session on how to approach Samak and prepare for the new NSC chief.

¶ 15. (S/NF) Tamthai said the NSC SYG is key to the peace process because he chairs the "mechanism" created by former interim PM Surayud Chulanont. Thus Surapol can either ignore the mechanism, kill it by starving it of funding, or embrace it. Shortly after he takes office in a few weeks, he will be briefed by NSC staff on the RTG's peace process mechanism. Tamthai is not optimistic that Surapol will respond favorably. He fears Surapol is among that strain of RTG officials who, while paying lip service to "the need for dialogue," see it solely as a means to "flush out the bad guys" by noting who shows up for the talks

CHIANG MAI 00000060 002.2 OF 003

as representatives of the insurgents.

Insurgents Deny Involvement in Hotel Bombing

¶ 16. (S/NF) The March 27-28 Jakarta talks, Tamthai said, followed a two-track pattern established in previous rounds: one track discussed long-term strategy for resolving the conflict; the other addressed operational developments and recent incidents. In Jakarta, the latter track addressed the March 15 bombing of the CS Pattani hotel. Tamthai said insurgent leaders insisted the bombing was unrelated to their movement. They claimed the bombing was arranged by political rivals of the hotel owner for his backing of a particular candidate in the March national senate elections. Those who set the bomb may well have been insurgents who were hired for the job due to their expertise in explosives. (Note: Tamthai said a growing trend in recent years was the hiring of separatist insurgents to commit criminal acts because of their capability to do so). Some RTG analysts, however, continued to assert that the hotel bombing was a deliberate signal by insurgents to "up the ante" by attacking new, more prominent targets.

¶ 17. (S/NF) Tamthai believes either theory is credible. He explained that the insurgency exile leaders the RTG meets with do not control all the perpetrators of violence in the south. By their own admission, he said, the insurgency leaders involved in the peace process - who are Thai-citizen ethnic Malays in forced or self-imposed exile in Malaysia, Europe and the Middle East, affiliated with either the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C) or the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) - describe the following breakdown:

-- 60% of those engaged in violence are controlled by the BRN-C and PULO leadership in exile;

-- another 20% are sympathetic to the separatist movement but operate outside the control of the exile leadership; and

-- the remaining 20% are individuals carrying out spontaneous acts of revenge or anger.

¶8. (S/NF) Tamthai specified that it is the BRN-C and PULO leaders representing the first 60% whom the RTG engages in the peace dialogue. These participants travel to the talks from their residences outside Thailand. Recently, however, the dialogue has been able to include some mid-level operational leaders who travel to the talks directly from southern Thailand.

Tamthai said he did not know how they got in and out of the country, though his team has helped a few of them with documentation and travel logistics. Tamthai emphasized the personal risk the insurgents must take to expose and identify themselves to the RTG by participating in the talks. The greatest risk is in the first instance, however, with the risk steadily diminishing the longer a particular individual engages in the dialogue.

RTG Addresses Human Rights Case

¶9. (S/NF) Another operational issue routinely on the dialogue agenda is human rights abuses committed by RTG security forces. In Jakarta, the RTG briefed on the disciplinary steps it was taking against those responsible for the March 21 death in custody of Muslim cleric Yapa Kaseng. According to Tamthai, four Royal Thai Army (RTA) personnel have been expelled from the military, and their commanding officer has been suspended and will be reassigned. Tamthai said the Ministry of Justice was taking this case seriously. More broadly, he said, there were two strains within the RTA: one that is serious about avoiding human rights abuses and disciplining those who commit them, and one that is not. It is hard to stamp out the latter strain, Tamthai observed, because the two strains exist in parallel right up to the RTA's top-most command levels. (Note: As he has before, Tamthai spoke very favorably of RTA Commander-in-Chief Anupong Paochinda's support for the peace process).

Searching for a Way Forward

¶10. (S/NF) Besides these operational issues, the Jakarta talks

CHIANG MAI 00000060 003.2 OF 003

focused on how to keep the process moving forward despite the lack of clear support from the new government in Bangkok, Tamthai said. Confidence-building measures that the two sides appear ready to take - provided the government embraces the process - include outreach to local insurgency commanders representing the "middle 20%" referred to in para seven above. Another step, Tamthai believes, is the readiness of the BRN-C and PULO leaders to commit formally and publicly to foreswearing outright independence as a goal of the movement, as they have indicated informally during the secret talks

¶11. (S/NF) Tamthai said the next round of talks was tentatively set for May, provided the RTG approved. The Jakarta talks were the last round in which outgoing NSC chief Siripong will have participated. RTA Commander Anupong also attended the Jakarta round, in part because he was in town accompanying PM Samak on a simultaneous but unrelated bilateral visit. Surayud did not participate, mainly because he wishes to keep a low profile as the immediate ex-Prime Minister. But Tamthai expressed pleasure at the day's news that Surayud had been reappointed by the King to the Privy Council, where he had served before stepping down in 2006 to take the post of interim Prime Minister.

Comment

¶12. (S/NF) In Thai governing circles, there are those who believe a military solution alone is the answer to the southern insurgency, and those who do not. In the post-coup military-appointed government, the latter group prevailed, allowing interim PM Surayud to set up the RTG's peace process mechanism anchored in the NSC. The new, elected government has yet to clearly tip its hand. In Mark Tamthai's view, the coming weeks before the new NSC chief takes office will be critically important for persuading PM Samak and his new government to embrace the peace dialogue.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW